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Government of the District of Columbia



**Child and Family Services Agency**

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Testimony of  
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Director

***Public Oversight Roundtable  
“Yes Youth Can: Confronting the Challenges  
of Aging Out”***

Committee on Human Services  
Tommy Wells, Chair  
Council of the District of Columbia

January 22, 2010

The John A. Wilson Building  
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW  
Hearing Room 412  
Washington, DC 20004  
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Good morning, Chairman Wells and members of the Committee on Human Services. I'm Dr. Roque Gerald, director of the District's Child and Family Services Agency.

Over 30 years ago, my first job was at a wilderness school for trouble youth from the juvenile justice and child welfare systems. Being a counselor in charge of 10 boys, ages 13 to 17, was definitely challenging but also rewarding in that 60 to 70 percent succeeded in turning their lives around. That experience became the inspiration for devoting my career to serving young people and their families. Later, I worked with many adolescents and their families in my practice as a clinical psychologist.

Today, as director of CFSA, I have the opportunity of a lifetime to make a difference to a large group of youth—the 1,177 young people, ages 13 to 21, in District foster care. Reflecting the trend of other urban child welfare agencies throughout the nation, CFSA is presiding over a groundswell of youth growing up in care that began around 2005, and that we project will continue through 2014. Five years ago, older youth grew to half the foster care population, hit a peak of 62 percent in 2007, and are at 60 percent today. Also mirroring a national trend, we're seeing an increase in young people entering care in their teens.

**Table 1: Youth Ages 13-21 in District Foster Care**

Age	Year (Point in time: December 31)					Trend (in age cohort)
	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	
13	142	150	106	95	89	↓
14	178	125	150	123	93	↓
15	195	176	136	160	127	↓
16	203	198	204	163	151	↓
17	185	214	215	200	168	↓
18	161	172	210	196	197	↑
19	133	149	165	190	183	↑
20	136	119	140	151	168	↑
21	3	1	2	2	1	→
Total	1,336	1,304	1,328	1,280	1,177	↓

Source: FACES PLC156MS

The last sizeable cohort—those age 15 in 2009—will reach age 20 in 2014, after which the number of youth in each age cohort begins to drop substantially, as shown in the black block.

The vast majority of these young people are growing up in the system through no fault of their own. Although government agencies—indeed, any institutions—aren't optimal parents, child welfare and the community share a moral obligation to do our all-out best for these older youth in our care. We owe them. With that in mind, the story I have to tell today is of a two-year mobilization at CFSA to find a permanent home or connection for every District youth in care. Everyone needs a family, and it is never too late to rekindle or create the life-long relationships these young people deserve. At the same time, we're going much deeper in preparing our youth for adulthood, with the goal of giving each one a quality foundation equal to what good parents ensure for their birth children. An indicator of the sea change in our thinking and action is that the first District-wide Youth Convening CFSA sponsored in 2008 focused on how best to prepare youth to age out. By 2009, the central message of our second Youth Convening was seeking permanence while continuing to provide solid preparation for adulthood.

Of all the many responsibilities of leadership at CFSA, making a difference for youth is, perhaps, my greatest personal passion. What's more, I've found that my executive team and our managers and staff working with youth share that fire. They're bringing enormous care and enthusiasm to the work of revamping our program for youth, which is well underway at a fast pace. I'll share the highlights of that revitalization today.

## **Alternatives to Aging Out**

The long-standing practice of allowing young adults to leave the system without a personal support system is now history.

In 2007, under CFSA Director Sharlynn Bobo, the Casey Strategic Consulting Group provided a wake-up call by showing that CFSA and Family Court had institutionalized aging out without permanence as the default goal for older youth. This practice in the District far exceeded that of several other comparable cities. One of the happiest actions in my early days as CFSA director was signing an Administrative Issuance that put an end to automatic assignment of Alternative Planned Permanent Living Arrangement—or “APPLA”—as a goal for older youth. Over 15 months, our census of youth destined to age out without permanence dropped from a high of 850 to 678.

In the first half of 2009, we conducted a comprehensive review of the cases of 722 youth who had the goal of aging out to explore their opportunities for legal permanence or life-long connections. Delving in from this new perspective revealed that 80 percent of these youth already had an established or potential life-long connection with at least one stable, caring adult. Sometimes, this was an unrelated person; more often, it was a family member—even a parent.

Social workers are now using this information as the foundation for rekindling or creating legal permanence or lasting connections for older youth. Adoption and legal guardianship are pathways for some. For many others, birth family circumstances have changed so that reunification with parents is possible. A new approach is the “commitment contract” for “informal adoption,” where a caring adult and youth agree to maintain a supportive, life-long relationship. Recent data on outcomes from the review of APPLA cases show that so far:

- Adults have confirmed the relationship youth said they had in 29% of the cases.
- Specific actions to solidify permanent or connected relationships are now incorporated into the case plans of 26% of the youth, and
- Five percent of the youth have achieved permanence.

## **Listening to Our Youth**

Input from young people in care is integral to program redesign underway. In 2008, 207 youth ages 15 to 21 responded to a survey about their needs, concerns, and overall well being. In 2009, we surveyed 150 youth about how best to improve CFSA programs for them. As part of this process, we engaged eight of the 83 teens working at CFSA under the Mayor’s Summer Youth Employment Program in conducting a “listening tour” with youth in care. Seven of the teens who conducted the tour also happened to be in foster care. They interviewed teen residents of two local group homes. These activities provided a wealth of information straight from the young people we serve.

There was quite a bit of good news. For example, 86% of youth survey respondents reported feeling safe in their current placement, 86% were attending or had graduated from high school, 81% had an adult other than their social worker to call on for support, and 69% had received advice about higher education or vocational training. Youth and social workers said current CFSA programs had a number of strong points. Among these were college preparation and our annual college tours, work readiness and employment support, and life skills training.

During the “listening tour,” our young people also provided solid suggestions for improving programs directed to them. At the top of their list were: increased flexibility of scheduling and smaller groups for life-skills training, more involvement of foster parents and other caregivers, better communication about all services available to youth in care, more individual attention, and services in the community instead of at CFSA.

Table 2: Feedback, Opinions, and Desires from Two Samples of District Youth in Care	
General Needs (Self-reported responses from 207 youth in care, 2008)	Program Redesign (Youth “Listening Tour” and social worker survey, 2009)
<p><u>Doing Well:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Majority currently/previously in therapy said it is/was helpful</li> <li>• Feel safe in current placement: 86%</li> <li>• Attending high school/HS graduate: 86%</li> <li>• Regular visits with family members: 85%</li> <li>• Adult other than a social worker to call upon for support: 81%</li> <li>• Feel welcome in the community: 81%</li> <li>• Current placement healthy and comfortable: 79%</li> <li>• Received academic recognition or award: 78%</li> <li>• Celebrated last birthday with others: 77%</li> <li>• Know how to access employment resources: 72%</li> <li>• Know how to access help with school: 70%</li> <li>• Been on the honor role at school: 70%</li> <li>• Received advice about higher education/vocational training: 69%</li> </ul> <p><u>Need More Support:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Majority said social workers do not return calls promptly</li> <li>• Behavioral consequence at school (referral to principal, detention, suspension, expulsion): 64%</li> <li>• Inadequate opportunities to gain work experience: 50%</li> <li>• Don't participate in extracurricular activities at school: 48%</li> <li>• No access to a computer to do school work: 47%</li> <li>• Don't have copies of personal medical records: 45%</li> <li>• Never had a mentor: 45%</li> <li>• Cannot candidly discuss personal wishes in court: 39%</li> <li>• Changed schools five or more times since entering care: 35%</li> </ul>	<p><u>Best Features of Current Youth Program:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• College preparation and tours</li> <li>• Vocational assessment and connections</li> <li>• Education, Training and Vocational (ETV) funding</li> <li>• Life skills training</li> <li>• Work readiness and employment support</li> <li>• Social activities</li> </ul> <p><u>Room for Improvement:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More flexible time slots</li> <li>• More weekend programs</li> <li>• More attractive community-based locations</li> <li>• Smaller groups and some peer-led sessions</li> <li>• Closer partnering with foster parents and other caregivers</li> <li>• Timely payment of stipends</li> <li>• More emphasis on money management</li> <li>• Better communication about all services available to youth in care and how to access them for both youth and social workers</li> <li>• Individual assessments and more consultative services</li> <li>• Improved collaboration with ongoing social workers</li> <li>• More guest speakers</li> <li>• Increased staff for the youth program</li> </ul>

Last summer, I started the Director’s Youth Advisory Board so I could get regular, direct feedback about youth needs and concerns. In turn, working to implement positive change gives these young people experience in leadership and making a difference. My advisory board of 12 includes youth in care, ages 16 to 21, as well as several young adults formerly in care. We meet monthly and have held two weekend retreats so far.

From top to bottom, youth input is a cornerstone of CFSA’s program and service redesign. We’re reaching out to ensure youth have a strong voice in everything from their individual case plans to the broader policies and programs affecting all. Equally important, we’re hearing—and acting on—what our youth have to say.

## Youth Empowerment

For several years, the Office of Youth Development and Center of the Keys for Life (CKL) program were the centerpiece of CFSA services for youth in care. Late last summer, we essentially disbanded these entities to build a new and more effective program in tune with what youth say they need.

The new Office of Youth Empowerment (OYE) is restructuring to keep cases of older youth ages 18 to 21, to counsel out-of-home social workers in serving all other youth, and to provide a rich variety of services all youth in care can access. All managers and staff in OYE have been trained in the nationally recognized Positive Development approach to youth work and are integrating numerous features youth want into the revitalized program. Flexibility is an example. Instead of twice a year, youth can now catch an orientation to the full range of youth services twice a month. In direct response to youth input, life-skills sessions are no longer on a rigid schedule but take place at different times and locations. Repetition of sessions gives youth choices of when to attend and keeps the group of participants at each session smaller. This allows for the increased individual attention youth requested.

In partnership with social workers, foster caregivers, and the community, the new program goals are to teach, train, and guide young people in care; to ensure permanence or life-long connections for them; and ultimately to help each one recognize and begin to develop his or her unique potential. As a brief overview, OYE offers services in six core categories.

- **Assessments:** Self-tests help youth identify their needs, interests, and talents. Standardized instruments reveal mastery of life skills and vocational aptitudes, providing a sound basis for individual attention and growth. The nationally acclaimed Ansell-Casey Online Life Skills Assessment is the centerpiece.
- **Training and Guidance:** Interactive classes and workshops “stand in” for family guidance on a wide range of topics of interest and importance to young people today. Youth can attend sessions in health and self-care, relationships, safe sexual behavior and pregnancy prevention, money management, educational planning and study skills, finding and keeping a job, career planning, and communication. A recent workshop raised awareness about the legal ramifications and dangers of “sexting and texting” via cell phones and the Internet. Due to popular demand, we are scheduling repeats.
- **Education:** Youth have support for academic achievement, completion of high school, and entry into college or vocational training. Social workers now conduct an extensive education assessment annually for each youth through twelfth grade and include necessary academic support services in case plans. Tutors, mentors, application guidance, and scholarships are all available. College and vocational tours expose youth to a broad range of options.
- **Work:** In addition to workshops on resume preparation, interview techniques, and looking for a job, youth have support in identifying and tapping opportunities for internships and paid work. OYE partners with the District Department of Employment

Services and local employers to create and identify work experience opportunities specifically for youth in care.

- **Broad Horizons:** Opening the world is of special importance to youth in care. OYE works to create opportunities for our young people to meet inspiring and successful adults, volunteer, participate in school and community activities, and travel.
- **Fun:** Good times help young people develop social skills, make new friends, and try out healthy leisure activities. Throughout the year, OYE gets foster youth together for parties, movie nights, pizza outings, bowling, field trips, and other fun events. A group of youth plans, directs, and stars in a gala fashion show each spring.

To fulfill a major recommendation from youth, we're planning to move OYE into the community this spring. The program will operate from the former Paul Robeson School, a District-owned space on 10<sup>th</sup> Street NW close to the Georgia Avenue-Petworth Metro station. The space is attractive, light-filled, and nearly perfect for offering a host of services to youth in care at a single, community-based location. A presence on Facebook is under development to keep youth informed of the burgeoning calendar of services and events that will be available at this new center.

### **Strengthening Partnerships on Behalf of Youth**

As I mentioned a moment ago, partnerships with social workers, foster parents and other caregivers, and the community are critical to fully serving District youth in care. I'll highlight a few of the most important ones in place or under development.

- New Human Care Agreements that CFSA is about to negotiate with congregate care and independent living providers contain the strongest set of performance and outcome targets we have ever required. Although these providers don't have case management responsibility, we'll require them to support the push to permanence or life-long connections for youth. They must be involved in service planning at least quarterly and must offer individualized life-skills development. Therapeutic programs must have clinical staff on site and provide groups that address youth issues of anger, grief, and loss. For the first time, CFSA monitors are prepared to expand their oversight of licensing regulations to include provider adherence to programmatic requirements and the quality of these services.
- We're continuing to encourage local development of a broader range of placement options tailored to youth with specific needs. For example, two community-based providers operate the Teen Bridge program. It offers 18 youth at a time up to six months of intensive assistance with behavioral issues and preparation for independent living.
- Foster parents have long been invited to major meetings and court hearings concerning youth in their homes. Again, based on a youth recommendation, plans are underway to do more to engage foster parents in case planning and the broad range of

OYE activities. OYE is also exploring development of a series of programs specifically for foster parents, other caregivers, and social workers serving youth.

- Last November, CFSA and the District's Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services (DYRS) entered into a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) that improves services to youth who are, or who should be, involved with both agencies. A senior-level steering committee meets regularly to plan services for shared youth, establish clear roles of both agencies around individual cases, and identify and troubleshoot emerging policy and process issues. While the number of youth involved with both agencies remains fairly low (95 as of this month), this MOA is a major step forward in coordinating services to meet their multiple needs.
- At the request of my Youth Advisory Board, CFSA is drafting legislation that would give District youth in care and alumni of care the same hiring preference for District Government jobs as residents and veterans. We're also gearing up to comply with the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act.
- Finally, community groups are increasingly stepping forward to offer events, growth experiences, and other extras for youth in care. These range from computers for college-bound youth to social events, learning experiences, and all-expense-paid trips. We gratefully take advantage of every offer that is solidly in the best interest of our youth in care. Support from the community means a great deal to these young people and is often invaluable in expanding their horizons.

In closing, CFSA has never been more active in what matters most to youth in care: a meaningful say in programs and services that affect them, growing opportunities for individualized support, permanence, life-long connections, and solid preparation for adulthood. While far from perfect, our services are well on the way to providing much more of what youth say they want and need—and achieving greater effectiveness as a result. This is worthwhile work that all of us at CFSA are pursuing with spirit and enthusiasm. We owe these young people our best, they need and richly deserve it, and we're determined to continue moving forward in delivering for all of them.